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REFLECTIONS ON READING

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As Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and other forms of communication have exploded in recent years, some have seen the Navy Professional Reading Program's mission of advocating the reading of worthwhile books as rather "quixotic." This term, derived from the great Spanish novel *Don Quixote of La Mancha*, in which the title character does battle with a windmill, is often used to describe wasted effort and foolish endeavors. But in fact, promoting literature is less quixotic these days than ever, in part because of technological developments in electronic reading devices. The popularity of such electronic readers as the iPad, Kindle, and Nook has actually revived the art of reading. These devices don't replace the art of reading—they make it easier! They also make it, in the eyes of many, a "cool" thing to do. While reading a dusty old book from some library shelf is decidedly "old school," reading the same material as an electronic book (e-book) on the screen of a high-tech tablet computer is somehow more socially acceptable.

The purchase of an e-book reader, now costing less than a hundred dollars in some formats, opens the door to literally hundreds of thousands of books from every genre, most for a minimal fee and many for free. As a bonus, the wireless communications technology that makes such devices possible means that the time lapse between thinking about obtaining a book and beginning to read it can be measured in mere seconds. Never in recorded history have information and entertainment been so readily available. So, if e-book readers make reading easier (and more socially acceptable), how do we encourage people to read books on these devices and in hard copy? One way is to consider what some well-known and highly intelligent folks have had to say over the centuries about the value of reading.

- One of the earliest recorded quotes about reading came from Chinese philosopher Confucius, who noted: "No matter how busy you may think you are, you must find time for reading, or surrender yourself to self-chosen ignorance."

- Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus (ca. 1466–1536) wrote, “When I get a little money, I buy books; and if any is left, I buy food and clothes.”
- In the eighteenth century, columnist Richard Steele said, “Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body.”
- One of America’s greatest writers and humorists, Mark Twain, was quoted as saying, “The man who does not read good books has no advantage over the man who can’t read.”
- At least two U.S. presidents have shared their thoughts about reading. Harry S. Truman noted, “Not all readers are leaders, but all leaders are readers,” and Lyndon Baines Johnson once said, “A book is the most effective weapon against intolerance and ignorance.”
- In more recent years, management consultant and best-selling author Stephen Covey has written, “There’s no better way to inform and expand your mind on a regular basis than to get into the habit of reading good literature. . . . You can get into the best minds that are now or that have ever been in the world.”
- The highly popular and prolific author Stephen King calls books “a uniquely portable magic.”
- Publisher Charles Scribner says, “Reading is a means of thinking with another person’s mind; it forces you to stretch your own.”
- Educator and reading expert Mortimer Alder says, “It’s not how many books you get through, it’s how many books get through to you.”
- Finally, motivational speaker Charlie “Tremendous” Jones has declared, “You’re the same today as you’ll be in five years except for the people you meet and the books you read.”

Many of these pithy quotes would make great bumper stickers, and they serve an important purpose by helping to capture the joy and fascination that can be found in reading. The Navy Professional Reading Program is a focused effort to make books of consequence available at little or no cost to sailors throughout the fleet. Our hope is that they will be read, in hard-copy or e-book form, in order to improve the professionalism of the men and women of the finest navy in the world.

JOHN E. JACKSON